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ABSTRACT

The reader is one in a series of stories of the Blackfeet Indians which take place when the people were at the height of their power, hunting buffalo north to the North Saskatchewan River, south to the Yellowstone River, east to the Montana-North Dakota border, and west to the Rocky Mountains. The story is about Little Blaze, a young Blackfeet boy, who is jealous of his older brother, who has been chosen to be the ahwa waki (the buffalo runner). However, he overcomes his jealousy and shows great courage in saving his brother's life as a herd of buffalo is stampeded over a cliff. (ERB)

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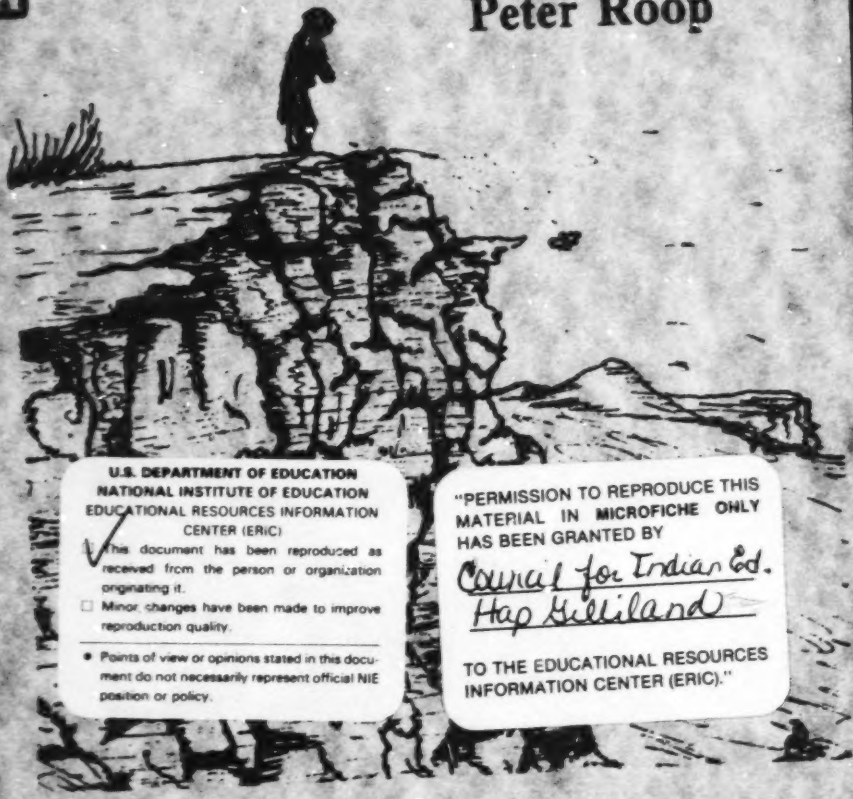
LITTLE BLAZE
AND THE BUFFALO JUMP

by

Peter Roop



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by

Peter Roop

Illustrated by
Jesse Wells
(Blackfeet)

Indian Culture Series
Stories of the Blackfeet

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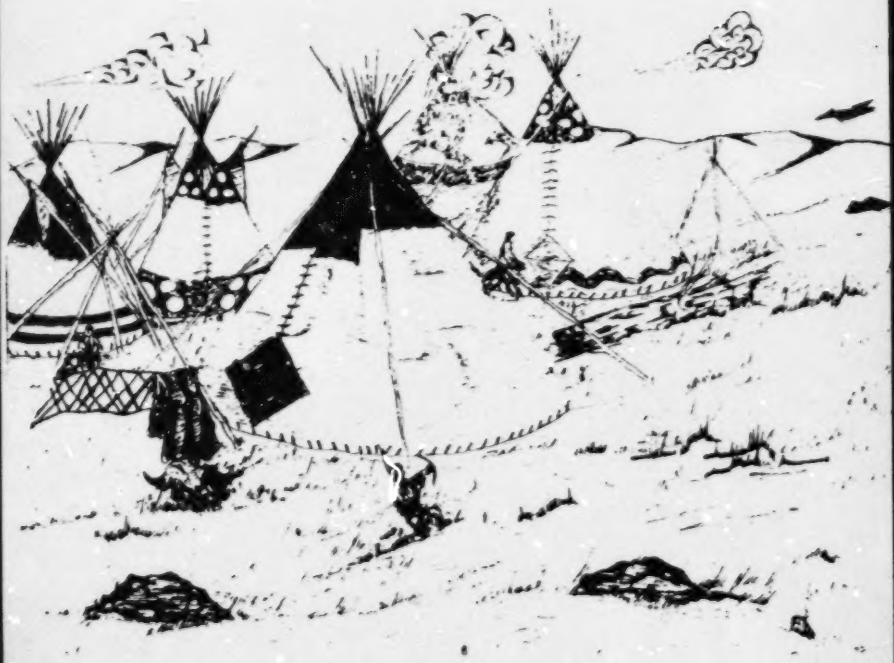
LITTLE BLAZE AND THE BUFFALO JUMP

Little Blaze threw back the buffalo robe covering the lodge entrance. He kicked viciously at a dirty dog sunning itself nearby. The surprised animal yelped and scampered to a safer place.

Little Blaze picked up his bow and arrows from where he had thrown them. He knew a warrior must always treat his weapons with respect, but now he didn't care. An angry fire flared inside him.

He notched an arrow and aimed it at a raven winging its way over the Indian camp. Before he let it fly, Little Blaze remembered that Omuk-may-sto, The Raven, was good medicine for his people. He would only bring



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bad luck upon himself and his family if he harmed the bird. Still, Little Blaze wanted to strike out against something, anything to make him feel better.

When he saw his friend Morning Eagle coming his way Little Blaze ducked behind a lodge. However, Morning Eagle had seen him disappear and easily discovered him.

"Why do you hide from me, Little Blaze?" asked Morning Eagle.

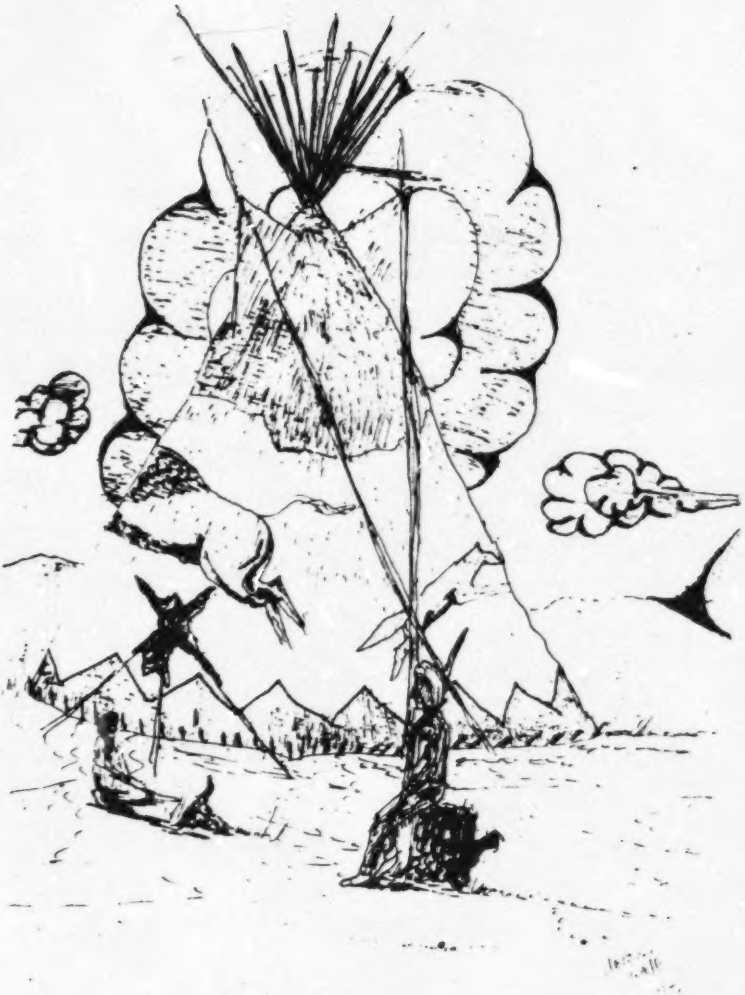
"I do not wish to see anyone," growled Little Blaze.

"Why is this? Am I not your friend?"

"Yes, Morning Eagle, you are my friend. But even a friend can do nothing for me."

"Tell me what Spirit causes you anger. Maybe my medicine can chase it away," offered Morning Eagle.

"It is no Spirit that makes me angry. It is my father!"



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"Your father?" asked Morning Eagle. "What has he done that his son storms around camp like somebody possessed by evil?"

"He has chosen Curley Bear to be the ahwa waki, the buffalo runner. He will stampede the buffalo over the jump tomorrow," Little Blaze said angrily.

"Why does this anger you? Curley Bear is your brother. He will bring glory to your family."

"Because I can run faster than he can," Little Blaze cried.

"Ah! Your father does not know this?"

"He does. He still says that Curley Bear will lead the buffalo over the jump because he is the eldest son of the chief. As second son I must stay behind the stacked stones and only help frighten the buffalo."

"Little Blaze, your father has spoken. You must obey him just as all his people do,"

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Morning Eagle said.

"But my father is wrong. Curley Bear may be as fast as the young antelope but I am as fast as the wind. So it is I who should lead the buffalo over the jump."

Little Blaze paused and then quickly added, "And besides, I am tired of my name. I wish to change it like you did. I hate the child's name, Little Blaze."

Morning Eagle looked closely at his friend. He saw the disappointment in his face. He saw the anger in his heart. He felt he must try to help Little Blaze.

"There is nothing to be done, my friend," said Morning Eagle. "You can't change your name until you do something brave. You must forget your anger. Come, let us hunt along the river bottoms for deer. Omuk-may-sto, The Raven, gives us his good luck."

"No!" Little Blaze said. "I wish to be by

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myself. You go."

Morning Eagle looked once more at his friend before heading away from the circle of lodges. He knew now that Little Blaze must be left alone to chase his anger away.

Little Blaze watched Morning Eagle until he was out of sight. Then he turned and walked in the other direction.

At first Little Blaze walked fast. Soon he began running, and he threw away all thoughts of his brother and the jump and just let his feet carry him where they would. As he ran, Little Blaze felt his anger fading away just as a crackling fire dies out at night.

Before he knew it, Little Blaze found himself at the top of the buffalo jump cliff. He stopped at the cliff's edge and looked down. Far below he could see the smoke-white buffalo bones from his tribe's earlier jumps. He kicked a rock over the edge, watching as it

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bounced down the steep slope.

Many times before Little Blaze had seen his people drive a buffalo herd over the cliff. It was an important event for it meant food for his people and new buffalo skins for robes and lodges. It was also a chance for him to earn a new name. If only his father would let him lead the jump!

Little Blaze turned away from the cliff. He walked between the stacks of stones which marked the entrance to the jump. From where he was the twin rows of stone stacks opened wider and wider, like the jaws of a hungry wolf. He knew that tomorrow he would be standing behind one of the stone piles waiting to jump up and frighten the charging buffalo.

Suddenly Little Blaze turned around and began running with all of his might to the edge of the cliff. A startled jack rabbit hopped

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nimbly out of his path. Little Blaze ran faster and faster. All he could see in front of him was the empty air beyond the cliff's edge. Far in the distance he could see where the earth and the sky met once again.

Without stopping Little Blaze ran over the edge of the cliff. The hot afternoon air whizzed by. Then, as he knew he would, Little Blaze landed in a small cup of rock jutting out from the cliff face. Many braves had landed on this thin ledge as hundreds of buffalo had flashed by to their deaths far below.

Little Blaze lay in the cup catching his breath and dreaming that he was leading the herd tomorrow. If only he could be the ahwa waki, the buffalo runner. He already knew what his new name would be.

However, it was only a dream. For his father had spoken.

The sun was sinking behind the Backbone-

of-the-World Mountains when Little Blaze returned to camp. He ate his dinner hastily and lay down on his buffalo robe bed. That night he had no desire to listen to the old braves talk about their heroic deeds of the past.

In the morning Little Blaze went with all of the other warriors for their daily swim. Then, after a quick breakfast, he joined the camp as it followed the trail to the buffalo jump.

Curley Bear had gone in search of the buffalo long before the sun had rolled into the sky. No one knew exactly when he would find a herd to drive back. But they must all be prepared when Curley Bear returned with the thundering herd.

His father, the chief, gave each warrior a position behind one of the standing stacks of stones. Little Blaze was to hide with Morning Eagle behind the seventh stack. At just the

right moment they were to jump up waving their robes to further frighten the running buffalo.

All morning the sun burned down brightly on the two boys. Flies buzzed and bit Little Blaze and Morning Eagle who had long ago given up battling them. The rising heat made the brown land dance and swirl in the distance. Both boys strained their eyes for the tell-tale sign of dust which meant the herd was coming.

It was Morning Eagle who saw the cloud of dust first.

"There, far beyond the last pile of rocks," he said excitedly to Little Blaze.

Little Blaze leaned forward squinting his eyes until he saw it too. Then, he jumped up and ran to his father.

"They come! Morning Eagle and I can see their dust," Little Blaze told his father as he

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pointed far out over the plains.

"Hyi! You are right, my son. Your brother leads a good herd. Now quickly get back to your place."

Little Blaze sprinted back. Before long he could see Curley Bear running swiftly in front of the small, brown herd of buffalo.

"Ah, we will eat well tonight, Little Blaze," whispered Morning Eagle.

"Yes, it is a good herd," Little Blaze said with only a hint of sadness in his voice. "I only wish it was me out in front."

"Maybe next year your father will choose you," suggested Morning Eagle.

Little Blaze grunted and kept looking at the approaching herd. He could see Curley Bear very well now.

Suddenly he grabbed Morning Eagle.

"Something is wrong with Curley Bear," he said with fear in his voice.

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"What?" asked Morning Eagle.

"Curley Bear is not very far in front of the herd. They are much too close to him."

"Hyi! You are right. If he cannot make it to the edge of the cliff, the buffalo will surely run him down!"

The stampeding herd was about a long arrow's shot behind Curley Bear when he reached the first stack of stones. All at once the braves behind those piles leapt into the air waving spears and robes and shouting. The frightened buffalo bellowed and entered the funnel of rocks.

By now it was clear that Curley Bear was in great danger. The hard hooves of the buffalo beat the earth with the sound of the thunder in the sky. Curley Bear was beginning to slow down just when he needed to be running his very fastest.

Curley Bear passed the third, then the

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fourth, then the fifth stone stacks. At each one new braves rose shouting and waving. The buffalo gained on Curley Bear until they were less than a spear's throw behind his tiring feet.

As Curley Bear neared Little Blaze's stack he turned and looked back. He never saw the sharp stone sticking up in front of him. Curley Bear hit the rock running full speed and tumbled into a heap on the ground.

Like an arrow shot from a well-pulled bow Little Blaze dashed to his brother. He grabbed Curley Bear under his arms and yanked him to his feet. The ground rocked with the crash of the buffalo. Little Blaze could almost feel the hot, foamy breath of the first buffalo.

Using all his strength Little Blaze began running with Curley Bear to the edge of the cliff. The buffalo got closer and closer. Then, like stones dropped into a pond, the two boys

disappeared over the cliff. The stampeding buffalo followed. One by one the herd plunged over the edge.

Once in the narrow cup, Little Blaze hugged his older brother close. Inches from their heads sharp hooves clawed wildly for the suddenly missing ground. The earth shook with anger as their great bodies crashed into it far below the huddled boys.

Slowly a strange silence filled the air. Little Blaze looked up. No more buffalo hurtled past them. He lifted Curley Bear to his feet. Side by side the two braves watched their tribe gather beneath them to begin butchering the dead buffalo.

Then he heard a voice call from above them.

"Come my sons. Let us celebrate this good jump. The Sun Spirit certainly has shone on our tribe. And let us celebrate the brave

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deeds of my children."

That night after a huge meal of boiled buffalo ribs, Little Blaze was called before his father.

"Little Blaze, today without thinking of your own safety you ran in front of the buffalo and saved your brother. As you know, when any warrior does a deed of courage he may be given a new name to honor his act. I now give you the name, Charging Bull."

"Hyi! Charging Bull!" Little Blaze could scarcely believe his father's words. His dream had come true. He felt a warm glow spreading through his body like sunshine after a storm.

Charging Bull, that was a good name. And Little Blaze was sure it was a name which would be spoken with pride around Blackfeet campfires for many moons to come.

TO THE READER

This is one of a series of stories of the Blackfeet Indians which take place when the Blackfeet were at the height of their power, hunting buffalo north to the North Saskatchewan River, south to the Yellowstone river, east to the Montana North Dakota border, and west to the Rocky Mountains, and raiding far beyond. The Blackfeet people still live in the heart of this territory, in Southern Alberta and North Central Montana.

Little Blaze and the Buffalo Jump is about Blackfeet life before the coming of the horse.

Natosi: Strong Medicine is a story of the capture of the first horses by the Blackfeet.

Quest for Courage is a novel of Blackfeet life in the early 1800's, when life centered around horses and buffalo, and the Blackfeet had become one of the most powerful tribes on the northern plains. Lame Bear, a boy who has been crippled by a broken leg, overcomes his handicap in the pursuit of a wild stallion which has eluded the greatest of warriors.

Sik-ki-mi is the story of a Blackfeet boy who faces the first steamboat on the Yellowstone while on a raid to bring back a buffalo horse from a Crow camp.

These stories are published cooperatively by the Council for Indian Education and the Heart Butte School Bilingual Program.

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LITTLE BLAZE AND THE BUFFALO JUMP

In the days before horses, Little Blaze, a Blackfeet boy, is jealous of his older brother and his opportunities. However, he overcomes his jealousy and shows great courage in saving his brother's life as a herd of buffalo is stampeded over a cliff.